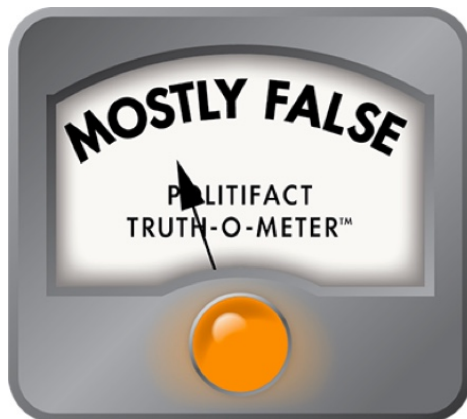


Fact-checking claims that NATO, US broke agreement against alliance expanding eastward

[politifact.com/factchecks/2022/feb/28/candace-owens/fact-checking-claims-nato-us-broke-agreement-again](https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2022/feb/28/candace-owens/fact-checking-claims-nato-us-broke-agreement-again)



Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, Russia, on Feb. 27, 2022. (AP)

By [Bill McCarthy](#). February 28, 2022

If Your Time is short

- No legal agreement prohibits NATO from expanding eastward.

- Russians have argued that comments made by U.S. and other Western leaders during the negotiations over the reunification of Germany constituted a promise that NATO would not extend beyond then-East Germany. Those allegations have sparked decades of debate amongst those involved in the events, and scholars studying them.
- Even scholars who say they believe western powers did offer the Soviet Union assurances about NATO expansion say Owens' claim is misleading.

Two days before Russia invaded Ukraine with an assault that intelligence officials had warned was coming, conservative commentator Candace Owens insisted that the U.S. was "at fault."

"NATO (under direction from the United States) is violating previous agreements and expanding eastward," Owens said in the [Feb. 22 tweet](#), which directed her more than 3 million followers to remarks from Russian President Vladimir Putin that she said showed "what's actually going on."

Owens' comment echoed a grievance claimed by Putin and other Russian leaders regarding the West's negotiations with the Soviet Union after the Cold War.

The subject of the grievance is whether the U.S. and its Western allies promised the Soviet Union during negotiations over the reunification of Germany that they would not allow NATO to expand its membership east of the Cold War border.

The question has fueled decades of debate and disagreement over what was said around those negotiations, what was meant by it all, and whether Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and other leaders received certain assurances regarding NATO's expansion beyond East Germany.

But even historians who argue that the Soviets were led to believe that NATO would not expand farther to the east told PolitiFact Owens' statement is more wrong than right. No binding, legal agreement ever codified the terms that Putin's camp — and Owens — now say were violated.



"Such an agreement was never made," NATO says in a fact page [on its website](#), one of [multiple pages](#) that addresses the Russian allegations. "NATO's door has been open to new members since it was founded in 1949 — and that has never changed."

Negotiating German reunification

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a divided Germany and the four powers that had occupied it since World War II were discussing whether the country should be reunified.

The [treaty](#) they signed in 1990 extended NATO into East Germany, which had been zoned to the Soviet Union. To appease the Soviets, it also granted the territory a "special military status" that ruled out the stationing of foreign NATO forces there.

The agreement said nothing about NATO's ability to expand farther east, a process that began with the admission of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary as members in 1999. Subsequent agreements, like the NATO-Russia Founding Act in 1997, also made no mention of a prohibition on eastward expansion.

"I know of no agreement signed by the United States, Germany, Britain, France or any NATO member that foreswore NATO enlargement," said the Brookings Institution's Steven Pifer, who was the deputy director of the State Department's Soviet desk [at the time](#) the 1990 deal was struck.

"This claim (from Owens) is factually incorrect," added John Lough, an associate fellow at Chatham House, a London-based think tank, who served from 1995 to 1998 as NATO's first representative based in Moscow. "NATO never made a commitment to Russia not to enlarge."

The source of controversy, however, is centered around statements made during the negotiations by Western leaders — particularly James Baker, the U.S. secretary of state, and German Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher.



U.S. President George H. Bush signs an arms-reduction treaty as Secretary of State James Baker, left, talks with Germany's Hans Dietrich Genscher in Paris on Nov. 19, 1990. (AP)

"Not shift 1 inch eastward"

One key statement came during a Feb. 9, 1990, meeting between Baker and Gorbachev.

After explaining why the U.S. wanted the reunited Germany to stay within the framework of NATO, Baker told Gorbachev that "if we maintain a presence in a Germany that is a part of NATO, there would be no extension of NATO's jurisdiction for forces of NATO 1 inch to the east."

"I put the following question to (Gorbachev)," Baker recounted in a letter to German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. "Would you prefer to see a united Germany outside of NATO, independent and with no U.S. forces, or would you prefer a unified Germany to be tied to

NATO, with assurances that NATO's jurisdiction would not shift 1 inch eastward from its present position?"



U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, left, looks on while Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev gestures during their meeting at the Kremlin, on Dec. 16, 1991 in Moscow. (AP)

Those comments, along with similar remarks from Baker's European allies, like Genscher and Kohl, were part of what researchers at George Washington University's National Security Archive called a "cascade of assurances" offered to the Soviets.

But Baker and other officials involved in the events have denied that the conversation ever turned on expanding NATO to other countries.

Featured Fact-check

The comments, they say, were made in the context of the German reunification debate. Talk of NATO's expansion to the rest of Europe never came up, in part because the Soviet Union and its associated Warsaw Pact were still intact. And in any event, those assurances were not baked into the final U.S. position and agreement around "special military status," they say.

"There was a discussion about whether the unified Germany would be a member of NATO, and that was the only discussion we ever had," Baker told CNN during a 2009 interview. "There was never any discussion of anything but (East Germany)."

Other figures have said that assurances were made, including Jack Matlock, the last U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, and Robert Gates, the deputy national security adviser at the time. Gates said the Soviets "were led to believe" NATO would not expand eastward.

Gorbachev has sent mixed messages. On one occasion, he insisted that he was promised NATO would not "move 1 centimeter further east." In another interview in 2014, he said the question never came up, though he added that NATO's eventual expansion was "a violation of the spirit of the statements and assurances made to us in 1990." He said:

"The topic of 'NATO expansion' was not discussed at all, and it wasn't brought up in those years. I say this with full responsibility. Not a single Eastern European country raised the issue, not even after the Warsaw Pact ceased to exist in 1991. Western leaders didn't bring it up, either."

Scholars have landed on both sides of the debate. Some, like Lough and Harvard University's Mark Kramer, who wrote about it in 2009, have argued that the idea of a no-NATO-enlargement promise is a "myth." Other interpretations say the question is more complicated.

"At one extreme, there's a position you sometimes hear from the American side, that none of this ever came up, it's a total myth, the Russians are psychotic," Johns Hopkins University's Mary Sarotte, the author of a book examining the issue, told the New Yorker. "On the other end, you have the very adamant Russian position: 'We were totally betrayed, there's no doubt about it.' Unsurprisingly, when you get into the evidence, the truth looks to be somewhere in between."

When Russian President Boris Yeltsin protested NATO's expansion, President Bill Clinton's administration asked the German foreign ministry to look into the matter. The ministry reported that Yeltsin's complaint was formally wrong, but it said it could understand "why Yeltsin thought that NATO had committed itself not to extend beyond its 1990 limits," according to the Guardian.



Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev on Dec. 20, 1990 in Moscow. (AP)

Why Owens' claim is misleading, regardless

To support her argument, Owens shared via Twitter an 2016 op-ed that Joshua Shiffrin wrote for the Los Angeles Times.

Shiffrin, an associate professor of international relations at Boston University, wrote that while no formal agreement restricted NATO's expansion, Baker and other diplomats had offered the Soviets verbal assurances that NATO would not enlarge to the east.

In an interview with PolitiFact, Shiffrin said that he still holds the same view, and that a new document he recently discovered in the British National Archives supports that case.

The record, from 1991, quotes a German official as telling British and American policymakers, "We had made it clear during the 2+4 negotiations that we would not extend NATO beyond the Elbe (a river in Germany). We could not therefore offer membership of NATO to Poland and the others."

But Poland joined NATO in 1999. The reason that was allowed is the same reason why Owens' statement about NATO "violating previous agreements" is misleading: whether or not assurances were made, the West did not tie NATO's hands with any formal agreement.

"Candace Owens' statement is more fiction than not," Shifrinson told PolitiFact. "No. 1, NATO as an organization did not make this commitment. No. 2, it wasn't an agreement."

"There is a legitimate point to say that the U.S. offered assurances to the Soviets that NATO would do something, but that is not the same thing as saying NATO offered an agreement," Shifrinson continued. "NATO is not violating, and it never offered an agreement."

None of that justifies Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he added.

Marc Trachtenberg, a professor emeritus from the University of California, Los Angeles, has summarized the research on the NATO-enlargement-promise debate. His writing also argued that U.S. officials made assurances to the Soviets that they ultimately reneged on.

But in an email to PolitiFact, he also took issue with Owens' use of the word "agreement."

"What we had here were purely unilateral statements made by high U.S. and German officials," Trachtenberg said. "Strictly speaking, this does not show there was an 'agreement' ... I think the term 'tacit understanding' is a better way to put it."

Our ruling

Owens said, "NATO (under direction from the United States) is violating previous agreements and expanding eastward."

There is an ongoing historical debate over comments that Western leaders, including Baker, made during post-Cold War negotiations, and whether what they said amounted to assurances that NATO would refrain from welcoming in countries closer to modern-day Russia.

But NATO as an organization made no such pledge, and the formal agreement signed at the end of those negotiations said nothing about the alliance not expanding eastward.

We rate this claim Mostly False.

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